

Debates on Islam in Europe

Submission

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Ayaan Hirsi Ali, activist, publicist, and Member of Parliament, appeared on Dutch television in the prime-time programme *Zomergasten* (Summer Guests) for the first time on 29 August 2004. Broadcast in the low of the summer season, *Zomergasten* is a “high-quality” programme in which the host has over three hours to interview one guest about various facets of his or her personal and public life. To facilitate the conversation, guests to this programme are invited to select a number of brief television or film clips that have special significance to them. The last clip Hirsi Ali chose to air was *Submission*, the twelve-minute film for which she herself had written the script. Publicity for the film had started the day before the broadcast when the *NRC*, a Dutch up-scale newspaper, published a full two-page portrait of Hirsi Ali in which she announced the airing of *Submission*. An unusually high number of over 750,000 households watched this instalment of *Zomergasten*.

Hirsi Ali is a Somalia-born refugee who, in an attempt to avoid an arranged marriage, settled in the Netherlands and later became involved in Dutch party politics through the Labour Party (PvdA). She became increasingly disenchanted with its stance on multiculturalism that she saw as too soft on Muslims, with Muslim women paying the price. In a much-publicized move, she left the social democrat PvdA in 2002 to join the right-wing People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) which received her with open arms; in 2003 she became a member of parliament for this party. Raised as a Muslim, she has publicly declared that she no longer is a believer, but points to the fact that she knows from experience how oppressive Islam can be for women. She rapidly turned into a highly controversial public figure because of her outspoken criticism of Islam. While in some circles she has reached celebrity status, she has also received many death threats and had to go into hiding after the murder of Theo van Gogh on 2 November 2004.

The film

Submission was written by Hirsi Ali and filmed by the late Theo van Gogh, a filmmaker and columnist well-known for his highly controversial style of criticizing Christians, Jews, and, especially, Muslims. The film opens with a prayer and then presents, through Hirsi Ali's voice-over, the stories of four women addressing God about the abuse they have suffered at the hands of men. These stories vary from forced marriage and incestuous rape to domestic violence and penal lashings because of sexual relations outside of marriage. The film has drawn public attention more due to its form than its content; images of women in transparent dress with Quranic verses calligraphed on their skin, covered with traces of whiplashes and beatings, cut through the narratives.

In making *Submission* Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh were well-aware of the power of the visual. Although some have referred to the film as a work of art, it is first and foremost striking in its unimaginative resonance with the visual imagery of Orientalism. Hirsi Ali's argument that she opted for a transparent veil in order to show the audience that there is a person, a woman of flesh and blood, underneath sounds hollow and overlooks long standing Western conventions of representations of the Orient. Simultaneously covering and revealing the female body through the use of transparent forms of dress or veiling has not only been a trope of Orientalist painting but also of representations of the erotic and the exotic in popular visual imagery. Allowing the viewer to scrutinize women's bodies while simultaneously covering their faces and using the technique of a voice-over disables processes of identification and turns these women into the generic category of “the oppressed Muslim woman.” The visual language of tortured female bodies and Quranic calligraphy, with a text that does not leave much to be imagined, turns the film into a pamphlet preaching to the converted.

It is hard to avoid reading *Submission* as a film whose main message is that Islam is bad for women. The film has all the characteristics of hard

The film *Submission*, written by Hirsi Ali and filmed by the late Theo van Gogh, was aired on Dutch television in the summer of 2004. Some have referred to the film as a work of art while others have stressed its offensive nature due to its portrayal of violence against Muslim women. Yet the film is first and foremost striking in its unimaginative resonance with the visual imagery of Orientalism.

core Orientalism. If, in its visual language, women's bodies are eroticized through a discourse of seduction and pain, the spoken texts refer to a more academic form of Orientalism that sees people's everyday lives as determined by Islam, providing a direct link between specific Quranic verses and the behaviour of Muslim men who abuse women. In an odd convergence with

fundamentalist thought, Hirsi Ali sees the meaning of Quranic verses as one-dimensional, only allowing for one possible interpretation, the one that is most harmful to women. Muslim men are then seen as taken to abuse their wives because of the content of these Quranic verses. While some may indeed legitimate their violent behaviour towards women with such references, arguing that Quranic verses are the cause of their behaviour is something entirely different. Furthermore, the film seriously misrepresents Islamic teachings; for instance, even the most conservative religious scholars would not be able to legitimize incestuous rape on Islamic grounds. Although Hirsi Ali has stated that it is not her intention to make others give up their religion, her presentation of violence against women as part of the essence of Islam and her use of a generalizing language that defines women first and foremost as victims of their own religion, makes it difficult to draw another conclusion.

What sort of reactions did Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh expect? Although Hirsi Ali did not like the title of the *NRC* article announcing *Submission* as “A new provocation by Hirsi Ali,” she was very well aware of the fact that the film would give rise to controversy. In her words, “The whole of the Muslim world will criticize me.” Van Gogh himself, finding the film a bit boring and overly serious, said his next film would need to have more humour. He seems to have engaged in the film project for the sake of Hirsi Ali. Jokingly, he also referred to a worst-case scenario in which Muslims would simply ignore the film.

At first, the fears of Van Gogh almost seemed to materialize. In spite of the obvious attempts of the media to get sensational responses from Muslim organizations, the latter either chose not to respond at all to the film, or did so in a restrained manner. By and large they regretted that such a film was made, but there was no concerted action on their part to get the film banned, as many had expected.¹ Most agreed that the topic—violence against women—was indeed relevant, but many were not convinced by the analysis and most pointed out that the visual language of Quranic verses and transparent dress was counter-productive. The responses of individuals varied from praise to outrage, with very few reactions from the target group, Muslim women themselves. In a televised discussion of Hirsi Ali with a number of abused women in a shelter, the latter walked out as an expression of offence by Hirsi Ali's injunction that they needed to acknowledge that the Quran condones the abuse of women. Interviews conducted by Amnesty International correspondents with professional women in Muslim communities abroad—as the film was made in English, evidence of it being intended for an audience abroad—also were by and large negative.

It was not until after the murder of Van Gogh that *Submission* again became the topic of debate. Hirsi Ali sent a letter to the *NRC* in which she stated that she felt guilty that Van Gogh had been killed because of his cooperation with her in producing the film.² In the days after his murder “the friends of Van Gogh” and others made a passionate plea for the right of freedom of opinion, translated in terms of an absolute right to say “whatever we want.” There were good reasons for such a “translation.” Van Gogh had not been as much a major opinion-leader but as a public figure due to his style of provoking and insulting, the vulgarity of his language, and his use of ethnic slurs, with Muslims consistently referred to in terms of bestiality. A host of intellectuals joined his anti-civil discourse with great zeal, claiming they were preserving “Dutch norms and values” which they perceived as being under threat by the presence of “almost one million Muslims” in the Netherlands. The right to insult seems to have become one of those central Dutch values. It was within this context that *Submission* was time and again

**Ayaan Hirsi Ali
and Theo van
Gogh on the set
of *Submission***

or women, she finds herself in the company of very powerful political players. She stands in a tradition of Islam bashers that have become increasingly influential in Dutch society, starting with Frits Bolkestein, former European Commissioner and former leader of the VVD, one of the first in the early 1990s to argue that Islam and modernity are incompatible and that a strong anti-migration stance is needed. Her ideas are also similar to those of the more populist discourse of the late Pim Fortuyn who considered Islam a backward religion. Her move from the Labour party to the VVD was facilitated by former Minister of Transport and currently the European Commissioner for Competition Neelie Kroes and former VVD party leader and present vice-Prime Minister Gerrit Zalm, whose consent she sought (and gained) in airing *Submission*.

She is also strongly supported by intellectuals who more often than not are self-proclaimed experts on Islam, the Arab world, and women, and who present their rehashings of Orientalist perspectives with an awe of respectability through their stature. Likewise, another major supporter of Hirsi Ali's work is the Editor-in-Chief of the Dutch mainstream feminist monthly *Opzij*, Cisca Dresselhuys, who publicly declared that while she might consider hiring a woman wearing a headscarf for an administrative position, she would not hire such a woman as a journalist, for, in her eyes, wearing a headscarf cannot be but the expression of women's subordination and hence it clashes with the feminist mission of *Opzij*. Dresselhuys compares Hirsi Ali's confrontational style with that of Dutch feminists of the 1960s. This analogy, however, seems to miss the point. While feminists of the 1960s attacked the male power elite, Hirsi Ali finds her

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referred to as a prime example of the right of freedom of expression that needed to be defended. As if to underline this point, some argued for an immediate second airing of *Submission*. The company holding the film rights, however, refused permission to air it on the day of Van Gogh's cremation, giving as its reason that it would draw attention away from his earlier and more interesting work.

Faced with criticism about her generalizing discourse, Hirsi Ali has in various interviews and talk shows acknowledged that only a minority of Muslim men beat their wives, that there are also positive elements in Islam, and has pointed out that she only wants to remove from Islam those elements that are incompatible with human rights and individual freedom. Still, her stance remains highly ambiguous, for she often simultaneously presents contrasting positions. When, almost one month after the murder of Van Gogh she presented her plans for another film, *Submission 2* (about the ways in which Islam oppresses the individual, starting from the position of women) and for a book, she stated that whereas people admit behind closed doors that Islamism is dangerous, she herself considers Islam in its purest form, the Islam of the prophet Mohammed, of the Quran and the hadith, as a threat to life.³

The Dutch elite

Hirsi Ali has been seen as a lone voice willing to take great personal risks to reveal the cruelty Islam inflicts on women that others had tried to cover up. It is certainly true that she has taken great risks, but the presentation of her position in Dutch society as a lone voice is remarkable. Whereas she does not have much support amongst Muslims, men

support there; her confrontational stance has been vis-a-vis Muslims (and those "soft on them"), a disproportionately underprivileged if not disenfranchised social group.

This is not to say that Hirsi Ali has not raised important issues; she may even have put sensitive issues on the agenda of a party that otherwise would have ignored them. Yet, her film *Submission* is not only ineffective in that it by and large alienates her intended audience, but it also has negative side effects. Whereas immediately after the murder of Van Gogh, the mayor of Amsterdam underlined the importance of uniting together all who are against violence, *Submission* builds on and contributes to further polarization along the lines of the simplistic contrast scheme of Muslims versus non-Muslims. Violence against women is certainly an important issue to address,⁴ but it would have been far more productive to acknowledge the work Muslim feminists have done in order to develop alternative interpretations, and to investigate causes and possible solutions for men's abusive behaviour rather than to assume a simple causal link with Islamic texts.

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Notes

1. When Hirsi Ali announced that she intended to make a follow up to *Submission* some Muslims went to court to seek a court injunction to stop her from doing so.
2. Hirsi Ali strongly criticized the fact that she, as Member of Parliament, was entitled to police protection while Theo van Gogh was not. The issue of police protection then became an issue of debate in parliament.
3. See *NRC*, November 29, 2004.
4. There are quite a number of films produced in Muslim majority countries on the very topic of violence against women, one example being Subhi al-Zobaidi's, *Women in the Sun* (Palestine: Refugee Camp Production), that includes the testimonies of the women concerned, as well as debates between female activists and religious scholars.